

Bright future seen for blighted stadium

■ Supporters of saving Miami Marine Stadium got tips from the co-ordinator of New York City's High Line, a once-doomed elevated railway that became a park.

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More than a decade ago, when New Yorkers looked up at the old elevated rail line that traversed the western edge of Greenwich

Village and Chelsea, most saw only a rusty, weed-covered eyesore.

But Robert Hammond saw, in the contrast of corroded steel and the burst of wildflowers atop it, an urban kismet — an opportunity

for a city amenity like no other. So he became an activist and, in time, co-ordinator of the High Line, the park in the sky that's become one of Manhattan's hottest, hippest oases.

Hammond felt that *frisson* again Friday when he walked into the Miami Marine Stadium's grandstand, a rundown relic of

muscular concrete overtaken by neglect, graffiti and wild plant growth that some believe could one day be our own High Line-like phenomenon.

"Wow," Hammond said after stepping through a big gap in the chain-link fence around the shut-

• TURN TO STADIUM, 2B

• STADIUM, FROM 1B

tered stadium and gazing up at its soaring support columns and vast, overhanging roof. "It's so cool. I really like this style."

Hammond wasn't trespassing. He was invited to lend his moral support and advice, along with a bit of the High Line spotlight, to the long-running campaign to save the stadium.

Friends of Miami Marine Stadium welcomed Hammond at a news conference attended by Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado, a supporter of the effort, and, somewhat incongruously, a large delegation from Miami's sister city of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, a major center of yacht manufacturing, whose members happened to be in town for the boat show.

Not coincidentally, Hammond's visit came at a critical moment for the four-year-old marine stadium campaign, which has proceeded in fits and starts. Activists have succeeded in saving the 1963 structure from the wrecking ball, won historic landmark protection for it and generated worldwide admiration for its still-dazzling architecture and engineering.

Leaders of the nonprofit Friends group had hoped to also formally announce an agreement with the city granting the organization the right to undertake the stadium's renovation, but that has been delayed amid disagreement over details of the deal.

Last year, stadium supporters were ready to walk away in frustration over what they said in a letter were "obstacles" imposed

by the city, but they now say the deal should be approved soon by the city commission.

The agreement would give the Friends organization, an offshoot of Dade Heritage Trust, two years to raise an estimated \$30 million to renovate the stadium, shuttered by the city in 1992 after it was damaged by Hurricane Andrew. Worth said the group has secured more than \$10 million of that, including \$3 million in public funds.

"The advocacy battle has been won, and we're at the cusp of the next stage," Friends co-founder Don Worth said. "Now we have to do it."

Worth said the High Line project holds telling parallels for the stadium effort: Like the Marine Stadium campaign, it was started by activists with few connections at City Hall, which initially fought it. To stave off the High Line's demolition, Hammond and his fellow activists had to sue New York City before winning the support of current Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

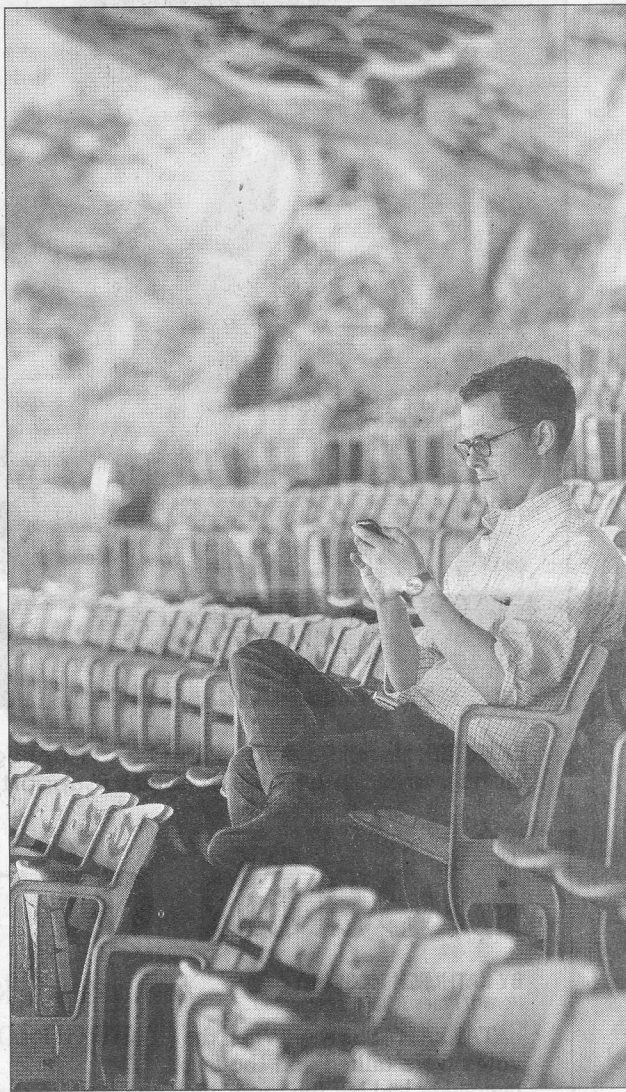
Friends of the High Line, the organization Hammond co-founded, raised about a third of the \$150 million needed to convert the former freight railway and today runs the park, which expanded to a new stretch of the old rail line last year.

Hammond said his group's agreement with the city was a crucial step without which the High Line would not have happened.

"You can fight City Hall, but at some point you have to partner up with it," he said.

After tramping up and down the stadium grand-

Could stadium become next High Line?



EMILY MICHOT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

CHECKING IT OUT: Robert Hammond is fascinated by Marine Stadium, even though it has been wasting away for the last 20 years.

stand, which is built over the water at the edge of an artificial boat-racing basin on Virginia Key, Hammond had other advice, too:

Try to preserve at least some of the stadium's look and feel of decay, which has become an integral part of its history and peculiar appeal, just as the High Line kept some of the rust in

place. That atmospheric mix would be especially appealing to young people who value un-glossy urban authenticity.

"It's easy to lose some of the magic," he said. "You have to nurture this feeling it has. Then it becomes a great legacy project, kind of a set piece for the next generation."

Two key stadium supporters — original architect Hilario Candela and University of Miami professor and architect Jorge Hernandez — say they are open to preserving at least sections of the stadium as canvases for graffiti, increasingly accepted as a mainstream, if still-edgy, art form.

But they hope otherwise to bring the stadium, which several engineering studies have shown to be structurally sound though in need of patching up, fully up to date with new seating and state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems. The Miami Heat have agreed to manage the stadium as a multi-purpose facility hosting concerts, powerboat and rowing races, triathlons and other community events.

"It would be the most magical place for arts, entertainment and sports, an aquatic Central Park," Worth said.

To generate revenue for its operations, the Friends group is also proposing limited commercial development on a portion of the stadium's vast parking lot, including a marine-exposition center and a restaurant.

To get around a law that requires voter approval for sole-source leases on public waterfront land, the city commission must approve a move that would make the Miami Sports & Exhibition Authority the stadium's landlord, but some commissioners have balked.

The city used the same tactic for the Miami Children's Museum on Watson Island, as well as two new museums going up at Bicentennial Park downtown, prompting a lawsuit by activists.